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SUBJECT: Successful Mechanism for Maintaining
Peace in Midsayap, Mindanao

Ref: (A) Manila 828 (B) Manila 782

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The municipality of Midsayap has been a flashpoint for conflict between Muslim and Christian groups in Mindanao's North Cotabato province, primarily due to disputes over land ownership. Land disputes recently turned violent on January 25, when fighting broke out between a local pro-government militia and members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), resulting in three deaths (ref b). To manage this conflict, the Philippine government created a new Interagency Task Force to investigate and settle land claims, as well as a new 24/7 monitoring outpost composed of representatives of the Philippine military, the MILF, and the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT). DCM on June 21 visited the Interagency Task Force and the remote monitoring team outpost. They appear to be innovative, successful mechanisms for maintaining peace which may offer lessons for other parts of Mindanao. End Summary.
Interagency Task Force

¶2. (SBU) Interagency Task Force Director Jim Sampulna, flanked by eight members of the Task Force including one from the MILF, presented a compelling power point presentation of the Task Force's composition, genesis, and progress. Eleven national government agencies, such as Environment and Natural Resources (Sampulna), Agriculture, Agrarian Reform, plus the MILF and Armed Forces, have local representatives as members of the Task Force. President Arroyo constituted the Task Force by Executive Order on February 28, in reaction to the fighting in January, with the mandate of investigating and settling land claims in Midsayap municipality. The Task Force proved so effective that the President expanded the IATF's jurisdiction to cover the whole province of North Cotabato on March 30.

¶3. (SBU) Sampulna described relatively quick success in resolving many land disputes, resulting in the return of the vast majority of residents displaced in recent fighting. The Task Force reviewed records of individual claims, interviewed claimants, placed land markers and issued titles. Some cases were as simple as explaining to farmers that they land they owned was not where they thought, but a short distance away. Other cases are much more complex, and difficult ones are still in process. Officials from various agencies at the table attested to a high level of cooperation within the Task Force and with local residents. The atmosphere in the briefing seemed to confirm a collegial, problem-solving approach.

¶4. (SBU) Asked how the Midsayap model could be applied to other flashpoints in Mindanao, Task Force members said the general concept of cooperatively resolving of land disputes had great applicability, since the root of conflict in many parts of Mindanao was about land ownership. But in much of Mindanao where land conflicts were between Muslims - instead of between Christians and Muslims - the institutions of the national government and Armed Forces were less effective and not necessarily welcomed by the local Muslim family clans. The Task Force was nonetheless considering how its successes could be replicated elsewhere.

Monitoring Outpost

15. (SBU) Located on a long muddy road from Midsayap, cutting through rice paddies toward the vast Liguasan Marsh, the Joint Monitoring Team outpost consists of a large hut with a dirt floor, communications equipment, a few bunks, and other basic necessities. Representatives of the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team, Armed Forces, MILF, and National Police staff the post 24/7. Malaysian military representatives said that local farmers insist they staff the outpost 24/7 in order to assure their safety. The outpost is placed along the road used in the past by armed infiltrators. During the day, outpost staff visit local farmers, relationships they believe would provide advanced notice of any future violence brewing.

Comment

16. (SBU) Practical, empowered cooperation among government agencies, Armed Forces, and the MILF have created mechanisms for managing and even resolving disputes that have made Midsayap a violent flashpoint between local Christians and Muslims, including members of the MILF.

The Government has prioritized containing Midsayap's tensions to preserve the generally durable ceasefire it enjoys with the MILF. The success of the Interagency Task Force and Monitoring Outpost demonstrates the commitment of the government and the MILF to working together, where possible, to maintain the peace.

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